NEW BEDFORD FISHING HERITAGE CENTER

Date of Interview: February 10, 2017

Mitchell, Bob ~ Oral History Interview

Laura Orleans

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Background

Name of person interviewed: Bob Mitchell [BM]

Facts about this person:

Age 73 "and 364 days old"
Sex Male
Occupation Owner, R.A. Mitchell Company, engines & generators, New Bedford
Residence (Town where lives)
Ethnic background (if known)

Interviewer: Laura Orleans [LO]

Transcriber: Millie [MR]

Interview location: R.A. Mitchell Company, New Bedford

Date of interview: February 10, 2017

Key Words

Shore engineer, Mattapoisett Inn, Kinsale Inn, Inn at Shipyard Park, the Skipper, Bill [McLean?], Leo Katz, Liberace, 104 Middle St./New Bedford, 76 Main St./New Bedford, Kevin Degan/Degan Buick/Pontiac, Lister Engines, winch head, Flyers, fish baskets, propeller, pumps, generators, scallop boats, draggers, strike, union, Bertram (Bud) Fish, Harbor Development Commission, Morse Twist Drill/New Bedford, Fowey, twin screw, hydraulics, propulsion engine, Myron Marder, [Reed Screeno?], Michael Pope, Karen Mitchell, Jennifer Mitchell, Internal Revenue Service, Massachusetts Department of Revenue, Maine State Police, New Bedford Ship Supply, Internet

Abstract

Bob Mitchell was born in Boston in 1943. His father started the R.A. Mitchell marine engines and generators supply company in New Bedford, which he took over and is now largely run by him and two of his daughters on the New Bedford waterfront. Mitchell talks about his engines apprenticeship in England after high school, with the Lister engine company, and his return to New Bedford to work with his father. He talks about his philosophy of business, knowing and taking care of the customers, working with family members (daughters), as well as some of the technical characteristics of engines, generators, serving fishermen and the industry, and other shore-side companies.

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[00:00] Introduction. Born in Boston, February 11, 1943, during the war. Family lived in Fairhaven. Father started the business in 1954; young Bob joined in 1961 and took over the company in 1977; now it's run by him and two of his daughters.

[05:12] Talks about how father started the business, various locations before present building. Talks about local people and stories. Describes the business of R.A. Mitchell Company and the role of engines and generators on fishing boats.

[10:10] Talks more about the Lister company and its products and how they work, innovations by both Lister for engines and Bob Mitchell Senior on different types of vessels for different fisheries, changes in technology of boats and of the industry in mid-20th century.

[15:04] More on changes in technology as boats got bigger, had more technical demands on board, explains various components of engines, generators, etc. for vessels that run constantly.

[20:09] Discusses the value of servicing engines on boats and how that's helped the Mitchell company—and New Bedford waterfront--stand out for total shore-side industries.

[25:26] Talks at length about yearlong apprenticeship at Lister Engine Company in England.

[30:00] More on apprenticeship, different tasks in different parts and locations of Lister Engines. Recalls various mentors he had at the Lister company from various countries, many with war-time engines experiences.

[35:36] Contrasts how he learned the engine business and how his father learned hands-on. Talks more about post-war hard times in England, social life at age 18/19 and what he learned from other Lister employees and apprentices.

[40:38] Describes how the Mitchell company changed as boats changed in size and fishing demands.

[45:10] More on engines, electricity, propellers, winches, and other components of boats, more on role of engines on boats, customers from other parts of US.

[50:49] Quotes prices of engines, installing onsite in New Bedford and elsewhere. Discusses the crucial importance of New Bedford as the service hub for the East Coast, compared to Gloucester and other places, and how everything is in New Bedford to serve the industry. Talks about ethnic diversity of New Bedford and how over the years the industry has "weeded out" the bad folks in various businesses.

[55:15] More on the advantages of New Bedford/Fairhaven as multi-service waterfront. Compares with what Gloucester used to be. More on value of knowing customer and how long it takes them to pay their bills. "90 days is cash to most fishermen."

[1:00:02] Discusses the tightknit New Bedford community, how companies like his stand behind fishermen.

[1:05:15] Talks more about knowing customers and their traits; understands the ups and downs of the industry.

[1:10:51] Talks about how two daughters came into the business, one nearly 20 years ago, and other 17 years ago. Discusses company's dedication to customers and challenges of working with family members.

[1:15:05] Further discussion of daughters always being around the business growing up. Sundays he'd take through round the waterfront to talk to folks, and to trade shows, etc. Now daughters are in executive positions at company. Also talks about ethics and paying his taxes and keeping clean books.

[1:20:44] Talks more about dealings with federal and state tax audits, and anecdotes about having to fire an employee who didn't believe company wasn't crooked, and a customer who paid cash for a generator that was later used for a marijuana-growing operation in Maine.

[1:25:08] Further thoughts on company philosophy on knowing customers and supporting their business products and company being service-oriented, as well as sales-oriented.

[1:30:23] End of Audio

[00:00]

Laura Orleans: Today is February 10 in the year 2017. This is an interview for the New Bedford Fishing Heritage Center funded by an Archie Green Fellowship from the Library of Congress. As part of this project we are interviewing shore-side workers in the New Bedford/Fairhaven fishing industry to record their stories, document their skills and knowledge, and better understand their important role in the fishing industry. The recording and transcript will become part of the permanent collection at the Library of Congress. I am Laura Orleans and today I'm speaking with Bob Mitchell at R.A. Mitchell Company in New Bedford. Correct? Yes. I don't know the time but it is approximately 11:15 -

Bob Mitchell: 11:15 or so.

LO: Bob, as I mentioned, we'll ask you to sign something formal but just for the record do you give us permission to record you for this project?

BM: Yes, I do.

LO: Thank you. Okay. We are recording again.

BM: Back on the record.

LO: Okay, though we know each other. I would ask if you could please introduce yourself.

BM: Yes, Laura. I'm Bob Mitchell, currently vice president of R.A. Mitchell Company. Also, Chairman Emeritus, you could say. I grew up in the business. My dad started the company in 1954. I came on the scene in 1961, went to the engine school factory from 1961 to '62. Spent approximately 18 months at the factory in the United Kingdom, England, and my dad and I ran the company. Well, he ran the company until 1977 when I started doing a lot more of the work and management. My dad passed away in 1982 and I've been running it since and have recently sold part of the company to both my daughters and they now are the President and Vice President of the company. Well, President and Treasurer/Clerk and it's registered as a woman-owned business, so I call myself Chairman Emeritus. I'm 73 and 364 days old; 74 years old tomorrow.

LO: Happy birthday.

BM: Thank you.

LO: Actually, for the record, what is your date and year of birth?

BM: 2/11/43. February 11th, '43. As I say, the girls Karen and Jennifer now own the company and run it and do all the day-to-day stuff. I'm not ready to retire yet but I've been thinking about it. Another year or so.

LO: Let's go back to childhood. Tell me a little bit about growing up. Where were you and what was the connection to the waterfront in those early childhood years?

BM: Okay. My dad was in the US Navy, got out of the Navy in 1945/'46, came back to Fairhaven where he was brought up. We moved back here in 1947 and '48. Charlie and I were born, my brother Charlie and I were born in Boston during the war and came back to Fairhaven. Lived in the, what is now the Mattapoisett Inn, the Kinsale Inn, or the Inn at Shipyard Park for approximately six or eight months while the house was being fixed up. Then moved in. Dad was, at that time had been fishing, was a fisherman, and decided to come home from the sea and worked on engines and became what's called a shore engineer. Took care of four or five or six boats, most notably for Mr. Bill McLean, who was one of the forerunners of the fish and lobster business in particular, and worked out of the back of his car.

[5:12]

Then had a small building, a small shop up and we moved in 1954 to a location on Middle Street, 104 Middle Street, which is now right where the Seaport Inn is, next to the Skipper restaurant. We leased that building from Leo Katz, who was the owner of the Skipper and one of the interesting sidelights of that building was that we'd go over and see Mr. Katz. Once in a while, Leo, for a lunch or whatever at the Skipper and there was one occasion there was a gentleman in the corner having lunch with Leo and it was Liberace. He was good friends with Leo Katz. But we were there in that building when I went away to school, came back, and then in 1967 my dad and I built a building on Main Street, 76 Main Street. We had two parcels of land, put it together, and built a building. Just before we actually put the first item in the building, boy this is huge, a huge place. We started putting inventory in from different warehouses that we had and it was pretty well full. But we were there for 25 years and after Dad passed away in 1982, in 1988, 1986 rather, when we were enjoying quite a bit of business from the company in Middleborough, I bought this building from Kevin Degan, Degan Buick/Pontiac and we moved in here and toward the end of 1986.

LO: Tell me sort of in general what does R.A. Mitchell Company do?

BM: That can be a very good question because there are number of things that my dad started to do. He started working on engines and we got acquainted with a company called Lister, which is an English diesel engine company, that dates way back to the 1900s, late 1800s, early 1900s. They made one of the first air-cooled diesels. My father took that idea, that air-cooled engine and coupled it with a winch that would sit on deck of the boat and be able to raise and lower the fish baskets when they got to the dock. He also invented a brake that would go on the engine. One of the things that used to happen was when they were unloading the fish they would get a riding turn on the winch head and the basket would go up and the whole rig would come flying down, breaking, and people used to get hurt, but he developed this brake system on the engine so at the touch of the handle, the winch head would stop in less than a half a turn. With the engine running full at 1800 rpm it stopped it quick. That got us started with deck engines and small engines that would run 24 hours a day and hold together. Previous there were no small engines that could do that, that could sit out on deck or sit anywhere and be reliable. That engine and subsequent larger engines and the larger one-cylinder, two- , and three-cylinder engine were able to run 24 hours a day.

[10:10]

What do you use an engine on a boat for that runs 24 hours a day? Well, my dad and Mr. McLean developed lobster dragging where instead of lobster pots they used nets and its wasn't so much an invention of dragging or an invention of an engine, it was the fact that how do you keep lobsters alive when you're out at sea? You have to recirculate the seawater. You have to keep them in seawater. The fact that the engine would run 24 hours a day, set up the engine on deck and you let it run 24/7, you flood the hold so that you have water up three feet deep in the hold. You put the lobsters in and the lobsters would stay alive. Previously only small pumps could run belt-driven from the main engine and there were smaller pumps not in a volume of water, so there were many times that the Friars, which was the name of the boat, the Friars, could bring in 20 to 30 thousand pounds of lobsters. Many is the time that I was down there at my sophomore and junior year in high school unloading the boat with, by hand, you get in the hold and drain the water, get in there and put the lobsters in baskets and up they'd go. Then those same engines and larger engines were put up in the building and would suck the seawater from off the dock and run that seawater through the building into tanks that were in the building and back overboard. It's less expensive to pump water with a diesel than it is with electricity. So those engines used to run 24 hours a day for three or four years. Yes, there was repairs and things that had to be done with them, and that's how we got involved more with it. When I got into the business, yes, I worked as a mechanic fixing things, working installing engines, and it was very good, very interesting, and still is to this day. So it keeps us interested in the business because there's something new all the time.

LO: So it sounds to me, first of all, your dad was an innovator.

BM: Yes.

LO: And it also sounds that his early fishing experience was important to what he was able to provide his customers in terms of coming up with new and better ways to do things here.

BM: Yes. In fact, I think that his mind having been at sea saw different things. For instance, the winch package, some of them, the Boston beam trawlers used to have an electric motor on the deck that would turn and run the winch heads that would just take the fish baskets out of the fish hold. That would save running the main engine, because they used to run the main engine, too, in, we'll call it the olden days. That didn't suit well for the engine because it's just sitting there running a winch instead of the propeller. But whenever there was a problem with the rope, the line that was being used, if it caught up, as I said before, caught a riding turn on the winch head, it got to be very dangerous.

[15:04]

You kind of have to picture laying the line up on the winch head and then pulling on it, and when you pulled on it you had to put the line off to the side. When it was finished you'd uncoil it and the basket would come back down from the dock. Well, that line would snake out and what caused a problem in the '70s or early '80s that there was an accident on the boat, on a boat, where the line made a riding turn and it pulled a man's leg off. Well, the legal profession, and

some would say ambulance chasers, et cetera, it's a shame that the fellow lost his leg, so they looked for the person with the deepest pockets and they went back to the winch manufacturer who built the winch 30 years before. When it left the shop 30 years before, no one had ever touched it since from the factory but they sued the factory and got a big lawsuit, won, and it put the company out of business. That's a local company here in Fairhaven, that we knew all the people and the owners, but it damaged their reputation and the insurance company only had so much money to pay, but they wanted more, so they had to go out of business. They went bankrupt. But we got into building engines, putting pump systems together, putting generators together. The old boats used to be 110 volt DC, they'd have a generator running off the main engine, belt-drive, and they had a separate little auxiliary unit that was mounted in the engine room. We used to call it a one-man band. We had an engine that would drive a long shaft and off of that shaft we'd run an air compressor, a water pump, and then up mounted on top would be a generator and off the other end of the engine there'd be a hydraulic pump and we built quite a number of those. Then the advent of AC electricity, which needed an engine that could run 24/7, and then it usually required two generators for reliability and for safety, so we would run two of those Lister air-cooled generator sets, 30 kilowatt and 50 kilowatt units. As the boats got bigger they needed more power and we would set each one of those generators up to run for three or four days, then they'd start the other one. Run that one till the end of the trip, they'd come back in. One of the things that the fishing industry has always demanded and well, I said demanded. The fishing industry commands service right now. In those days the boats would go out for seven, eight, 10 days, 12 days. They'd come in, a scallop boat would be ashore for five days and go back out again. Draggers were three days. The engine and components, everything needed to be fixed then.

[20:09]

You got to get it fixed. It almost didn't matter what it cost, you just got to get there and fix it. Some people and I did start to say demanded instant service and we knew deep down they weren't demanding it, but they needed it. So we lived up to our end of the bargain and provided the best parts and service for engines that we could. At the end of the day it paid off because some of our local competition would not put engine parts in inventory. They did have some mechanics, but they wouldn't stock parts. It cost money to stock parts. Well, we had parts on the shelf, we had service people here ready to go, and when the customer called, we were there. We believe from a business perspective that's one of the things that has allowed us to keep going and the competition is not here. We do have people that will want to buy another brand unit and that's fine, and there are people around that will fix some of that stuff. There's room for everybody.

LO: Let me stop you for a second. You just referenced the old days, that they would go out, they'd be, scallopers be in for five, so on and so forth. What's the era that we're talking about?

BM: They went to a different quota system and different days at sea system probably around 1995, 2000, somewhere in there.

LO: So this didn't have to do with the strike?

BM: No. The strike was a different thing. I believe part of the strike was that with some of the fishing, fish stocks being reduced, hard to get, scallops in some cases not as plentiful as they are now, some of the boat owners wanted the boats to come in and go right back out again. Well, I think part of the strike was the union crew, fishermen, wanted to keep it at the five days. I believe that's what part of the strike was all about.

LO: Then I want to return a little bit to the training. You talked about some formal training at the Lister school in England and I'd like to hear more about what that entailed. And then, I'm curious about the hands-on learning; I'm guessing by the side of your dad and just by doing. Tell me first about the experience in England.

BM: When I was going to high school, I had met Mr. Bud Fish, who was the president of Lister in the USA.

LO: Fish as in F-I-S-H?

BM: Yes. Bertram Fish. I will call him my mentor, second father, kind of thing. Took me under his wing. And while I was searching and approximately my second or third month into my senior year at school, he said Bob, you can make a good mechanic, a good person. Go and join your father. What would you think if you went to England to the factory? I said wow, gee, that would be good. So, he basically set up a year program. In England at the time, or in many European countries, they have an apprenticeship program. There's people that study an apprentice for work on the floor, the factory floor, how to run a lathe and machine tools, and that's what they're going to do pretty much for the rest of their life.

[25:26]

Then there's management apprentices where they have each of the students or apprentices spend six months in certain parts of the factory. That apprenticeship program lasts four years, four and a half years. The apprentice spends six months in a machine shop, six months learning how to make the castings, the molds. If they're over 21, pouring the metal. And come out of the foundry and the different sections of the foundry making, actually making the different components for the engine. A full-time apprentice spends six months, machine shops various tools and making various components, the finished goods. Then into the assembly making different engines. They actually work that assembly line. They took that four-year program, reduced it to a year. Now, there's no way that I learned as much in one year as others did in four, but I was able to spend two or three weeks in the foundry area, two or three weeks in the making the actual camshafts and crankshafts component pieces that they have. Then up a couple, three, four or five weeks a month, actually, in the assembly of different model engines. And Lister had three different factories in England so I spent most of my time in Dursley, England, which is just between Bristol and Gloucester, but they have another factory that made engines at Swindon and then the big engines, the Blackstone engines, were made up in Stamford, Lincolnshire, so I spent a week up there. But three, four, five, or six weeks in the different assembly lines of engines and then into yeah, you spend a week in the packing, packing and shipping department, then upstairs into the offices. That was one of the more interesting parts of it because they put me in the sales office doing quotations for some of the big engines that were going overseas, and I got to meet a

lot of the senior management of Lister Company. They had well over 3,000 employees in the town at Dursley, where I went, and it was very, very interesting. I learned how to grind drills. Yes, we had Morse Twist Drill over here in New Bedford, but in those days you used to have to grind, hand grind drills. Well, I learned from an 80-year-old Russian guy that worked in the factory putting together a particular model engine. The fellow that was teaching me was a tank driver in World War II.

[30:00]

Remember, this was only 15 years after the war. And Vic, and Bob Sorby, he was a tank driver against the Germans. He taught me how to put engines together on the assembly line.

LO: He probably taught you a lot of other things I'm thinking too.

BM: Yes. And yes, I was an American and you get your share of, he's the Ugly American. He's overpaid, over-sexed, and over here, but it's all good-natured fun, kidding.

LO: You were what, 18? 19?

BM: 18. Well, actually I'm going to say 19. Yes.

LO: But considerably younger than many of the other people in that situation.

BM: Yes. The people that were teaching me worked in the factory production lines, they were all over 30, 40 years old. Most had been in the war, but because that engine was used for the military, that factory was running 24 hours a day. Somebody had to work, put that stuff together. They were never bombed directly, although some bombs got jettisoned from German planes within a mile of the factory. The lessons I learned, very good. And I lived in what used to be the owner's home, a place called the Towers, with three other students; there were four of us total in that management trainee kind of place.

LO: Tell me about those lessons. Can you think of anything specific?

BM: To this day I remember the Russian man teaching me how to sharpen a drill. It's not sophisticated, but there's a trick to it. The biggest thing, patience when you're putting an engine together. You need step by step by step to do it correctly, which served me in good stead when I was out in the field actually doing an engine. It's a little different. Yeah, you're not using sometimes all new pieces parts. You have to clean all your parts, so it's patience. It's not going to be quick and instant. The factory can put an engine together in a total of four hours when it's going down a production line, different people working on it. It's timed out to the minutes to put an engine together. When you're out in the field, you're the only guy doing it and it takes a bit longer, quite a bit longer. Most of the teaching was go slow, think about it, patience, and at the end of the day it will come out and work. I was able to go out on what we'll call service jobs. I went to North Wales and worked with a road mechanic. Went out to these different farms and we'd fix engines and stuff. Did that for a couple of weeks. Went down to the south coast, to Fowey in Cornwall. That photograph that's right there, the small one, is Fowey. That particular

picture was probably taken in the 1920s, if not earlier than that, but there were some tugboats down there and they had to do inspections of the engines, so we'd take the side covers off the engines and go in and roll the engine over and check deflection readings on the crankshafts and those different kinds of things. It was very enlightening, very good. I think I learned a lot and it has served me in good stead.

[35:36]

LO: When you came back, it sounds like maybe there was more to learn on this end, but there was also perhaps a fair amount to teach from what you had learned?

BM: Yes.

LO: I'm assuming your father didn't have that same experience of going to England and going through that year-long intensive training?

BM: Correct. My father had picked up a lot of it from osmosis or whatever you want to call it. He learned from the seat of his pants. Yes, I came back with a lot of knowledge and I needed to be careful how I tried to impart that knowledge. I wasn't a know-it-all and that's part of patience that yes, if you know certain things you need to teach others that thing rather than dictate what you know. While I was not taught how to actually fix an engine, but you learn how parts are made, how systems work, and I want to say that the biggest thing I think I learned over there was how people worked. There's many different types of people, 90 percent, 99 percent will help if you ask, answer any questions. They were very, very good to me and they imparted some of their wisdom to me as to how to deal with people, how to talk with people or how to teach.

LO: By example mostly?

BM: Yes. You learn over the years, not just in England, that there's so many different people out there. They all have their ideas, they all have a concept of what they believe. It's not wrong, it's just different and you need to be able to rise. If you think they're wrong, okay, but you need to rise above saying something that's negative to them and try to impart your knowledge to the situation to allow them to either think about it. [Mimics] Oh, yeah, you know? I never thought of it that way. To wake them up a little bit. So it was I think good in that way, some of what I learned. Take drinking, for instance. I left here just a tad before my 18th birthday. Right out of high school, and I had never had a drink. When I went to England, drinking age was 18. The way that they would go out at night was to, and most of the students couldn't afford a beer, but they drank strictly socially. They had one, two beers. Done. That's it.

[40:38]

That taught me that drinking is a sociable thing, not drink to get drunk. So many of today's kids when they go off to college or even before college, unfortunately, they go in and binge drink and it's no good. By learning slow down, it's social, talk over a drink, it's good. As far as not affording, not being able to afford anything, the pay for the school was six pounds five shillings a week. That amounted to I think about 28 dollars. Half of that went toward room and board. So,

10, 12 dollars didn't go very far. We weren't allowed to have an automobile, plus my mother and father couldn't afford to buy one over there. Didn't need one. Walked everywhere. Bicycled or whatever. We lived just up the hill from the factory so it wasn't really a problem transportation-wise. But some of the guys would have a vehicle, keep it up behind the wall on the lane up top. It was good. Met some good people. In fact, every once in a while I think about it and would like to track down the three fellows that I lived with up there, but I'm still good friends with Alfie Pearson, who was just getting out of the four-year apprentice course.

LO: An American as well?

BM: Nope. He's English. His father was the vicar of the church, of a church. Great guy. Good fun. And he went around, he was a salesman for Lister's, went to travel the world. Was stationed or assigned to Colombia, South America, and was down there for many years. He and I stay in touch. He's now in Kansas, where he was one of the major players at the Lister offices in Kansas.

LO: We started to talk about R.A. Mitchell does. I think that led to having learned, but tell about what are all the different services that your company offers? Well, let's say to the fishing industry. Let's keep it kind of focused on that.

BM: With the advent of bigger boats and the use of AC, I'll call it house current generators, it would take two generators to run the boat. One propulsion engine would run the propeller and you'd have the two generators because one is a back-up all the time. So we got to build and into building a lot of these generator sets.

[45:10]

We would buy an engine from one source, buy a generator from another source, make the steel frame base to put it on, make the control panel to run it, set it up, test it, and off it would go. We'd put it in the boat. Or ship two of them down to the boatyards to install. With those engines having the ability to run 24 hours a day, yeah, every four years they would need work, so we would perform the overhauls and repairs and we would be here to do the monthly oil changes if that's what the customer wanted. Or valve adjustments or fix different components that might break. We've continued to do that now. We now use a lot of the John Deere engine products and we're one of the major players in the United States now for building our own generators.

LO: For the uninitiated, what's the role of a generator? What does it do?

BM: Makes electricity to power the air compressors, to power the hydraulic pumps, to run the electronics on the boat, to provide light, to provide heat.

LO: Pretty significant piece of equipment.

BM: Yes. Many of the shore side, I'll use the term, folks up the hill that don't have knowledge of the industry, [mimics] electricity, oh, you just plug into the wall socket. Well, you need a long extension cord if you're going to go out to sea because you can't get electricity out there without

a generator, which brings to mind one of the previous Harbor Development Commission Directors who said, [mimics] Oh, we're going to get electricity on the docks. We're not going to need you anymore. Okay. They spent $250,000 on putting electricity on the dock, and you know? No one has used it. A waste of grant money, still taxpayer money, but waste of grant money because some of those people did not understand what it takes to run a boat.

LO: Tell me, typically, we have lots of different-sized boats here, but on average, probably 80 to 100 feet?

BM: Yes.

LO: How many engines does a boat like that have?

BM: Most of the boats have a total of three. Most of the boats have three engines. One main propulsion engine and two generators. There are some boats, probably five in the whole fleet, that have two propulsion engines, each one smaller horsepower, but twin screw they call it, and two generators.

LO: That term, twin screw, is that --

BM: Two propellers. One particular boat, or now probably 30 of the 150 to 200 scallop boats that are out of New Bedford and it's getting more and more, have another engine that just runs a hydraulic pump, which is used to run the winches. One of the things that happened many years ago and I alluded to it in another conversation was that when the winch company went out of business, okay, what are the boats going to use for a winch? Well, they went to hydraulics and instead of running a chain up from the main engine to run the winch, they put a separate engine to run the winch or a separate engine to run a hydraulic pump, which in turn went up to the hydraulic winches up on the deck. [

50:49]

So, it's not easy to say oh, yeah, all the boats have three engines. Well, some have five with a winch engine separate. Some have two propulsion engines. Some have three generators. They have two big ones, runs one at a time when they're out at sea. When they're at home they have a small one which is somewhere else in the boat so that they can close off that room, so when they're working in the engine room, there's very little noise.

LO: Is there an average sort of cost that somebody, let's say I'm building a new scallop vessel and want to completely outfit it with --

BM: My stuff.

LO: Your stuff.

BM: Each generator is $30,000.

LO: Is that installed?

BM: No. Nope. Each winch engine is $40,000, plus the hydraulic pieces that go on it. The main engine, well, we just supplied a complete set-up for a repowered scallop boat. Two generators, a winch engine, a main engine, and a gear box. That was just under $300,000 for everything. Eight hundred horsepower main engine, 5:1 reduction gear box, and two generators and the winch engine. We're doing another project for the same customer in Alabama. He's going to have the same set-up. That customer's next boat is going to have two 150KW generators, big one, because he's going to make a freezer boat out of it.

LO: Is he based here or he's based in Alabama?

BM: No, he's based here. Lars [last name unintelligible].

LO: When you do a job like that do you send a crew down South?

BM: The shipyard installs. We can, but mostly the shipyard has the expertise to put them in and do the start-up and check. We test run and check every engine here before it goes and we try to set it up so that the shipyard basically is plug and play with panels ands controls and this. Most of the shipyards have the expertise to put it together.

LO: I gather that New Bedford has become a hub for services for boats? Not just for New Bedford/Fairhaven. Where do your customers come from? From how far afield?

BM: Well, in the fishing industry we've got from as far South as the Carolinas, North and South Carolina. Maine, some of the boats. One of the advantages of New Bedford is that no matter what you need in engines, electronics, shipyards, personnel, everything is right here. We have deep-water port. We have the docks, the city, and the town of Fairhaven have always been good in providing safe places to dock and it's allowed boats from elsewhere to come in. You can get food. You can unload your catch.

[55:15]

Some of the other people that you'll be interviewing, the fish houses, the [unintelligible], etc., have been here for years and years and years. Those of us that have been around for many years know that the fishing industry has supported us and has supported the livelihoods of a huge cross-section of the community. Ninety percent of the scallywags are gone. We've kind of tried to push and weed them out. One of the things that we like to say down here, take Gloucester for instance. The Italian and Portuguese fishermen and some American fishermen that fished out of Gloucester were old-school. They would argue about every bill that they got, because that's the way it was done in the old country. [mimics] Oh, it's too much money. I don't want to pay. Da da da da da da. Unfortunately, some people accepted a lower price, but also some of the fishermen didn't pay, so you can't get anything in Gloucester anymore. There is no New Bedford ship supply. There is only one fuel company. There's one mechanic that has a company that's got a good reputation. All of those companies that I grew up with on the Gloucester waterfront

got taken advantage of so much they went out of business and there's nobody. You can't get stuff.

LO: How is that different here? You've got also strong ethnic populations: Portuguese, Norwegian, Canadian, etcetera; Polish.

BM: Right. The shore-side businesses here knew what the fishing industry meant and their profit margins were set in such a way that it made it very fair for the fishermen as well as the shore-side business. And it's kind of grown that way. There's always going to be discussions about a price, but the shore-side businesses push to get paid. We know the ways, no one minds if a fisherman's had tough luck and he can't pay, we understand it. If he won't pay, we go after him. We try to keep those bad guys out. Once in a while one will slip through, but we try to work together so that we keep the bad guys out. And pretty soon they're gone. We work together with the good guys. And you kind of have to know your customers. There's been times I've had half a million dollars on the books that people owe and it's not a 30-days. They're not going to pay in 30 days, 60 days, 90 days. Ninety days is cash to most fishermen. You have to provide the service, then they have to go out on the boat and earn the money to pay the bill.

[1:00:02]

If they have bad trips or bad weather or this, they get behind the eight-ball. You stay with them, know who the right guys are, that's good.

LO: It's a unique community in that way.

BM: Um-hm.

LO: Pretty tightknit?

BM: Tightknit in that we'll try to look out for each other. There was an incident, my father told me about years ago. One of the major fish-boat owners was lax in paying a bill to my father. And another major shore-side company found out about it. It was a substantial amount of money that this company owed my father and the owner of the other shore-side company made a phone call. Said hey, before I do any work for you, you need to take care of Bob Mitchell. He's a little guy. One-man show.

LO: Your father was also Bob?

BM: Yes. And the pressure was put on the guy to pay. And it worked. The company's still in business. Does a great job, the one that was delinquent in the bill. Unfortunately, the other company that put the pressure is no longer in business. We try to look out for each other.

LO: What are the characteristics that are respected on the waterfront would you say?

BM: Trust. Say what you mean. Do it. Do it the right way. One of the stories, in fact I think I said it sort of as an obituary to a fellow--Myron Marder was one of the forerunners, founders of

the scallop fleets. He was an accountant. He knew his money end of things. He knew who the best skippers were, etcetera. But when it came time to do something on the boat or he needed a new engine or whatever from us, he would say, Bob, come over and give me a price on the engine. So, okay. So, you go over there, figure it out, give him a price. I'll just pick a number, $6,000. And he would go [mimics] oooh. That's a bit more than I figured. He said, do it for 5,700, you got a deal. Okay. You do it for 57, you give him the bill, bang, paid for it. He didn't try to argue about the bill after you had quoted or after you had done the job. There were those who used to do that. You get to know those people. And [mimics] I want a price on this generator. Okay, it's supposed to be 6,000. [mimics] 6,500. All right. So you put it in and he'd argue about the bill and da da da. All right I'll give you a couple hundred dollars, $300 off. [mimics] Nah, I want 500. All right, you got what you wanted. You started out higher. Is that fair? Well, if you know what he's going to do to you, that's what you have to do.

LO: It's part of that knowing the customer.

[1:05:15]

BM: Yes. And we have customers that will come in here and one did a year ago, [mimics loudly] I need a new generator for my boat. I don't want to pay big money. Da da da da. It's too much money. You damn guys charge so much money. And he's raising hell out in the shop. Karen walked out. [mimics] Hey, what's all the noise? What are you looking for? My dad quoted you a price. What do you want? Just a better price? And he said yes. Okay, $500 out. You can do that? Yes. Okay, deal. He came back in an hour with the check, paid, we had the generator here, put it in, done. He comes in. He's yelling, carrying on. But to him it's a game. He wants a good price, wants to know he got his little pound of flesh. You treat him fair. He treats you fair. Off we go. Now, there are people in this town today that won't give him five cents credit because he may next year be in jail, but I trust him. He will pay.

LO: Tell me: you just referenced Karen, your younger daughter. Tell me about their role in this business. How they got started and where they are today.

BM: We had enjoyed a very good run of business from a land-based company called Reed Screeno. They made vibratory screens for the gravel business, gravel and sand and dirt business. I had employed a fellow from England who originally started out at the Lister Engine Company, similar apprentice school that I went to at the same Lister factory. You may have met him. Michael Pope.

LO: Sure.

BM: He had been with the Lister company, went to Canada working for a company, Petter. Went to Atlanta helping to run the company down there. The two companies, Lister and Petter, merged. Everything moved out to Kansas and Mike was going to be without a job. We kind of grew up with him in the business. From 1970 on he represented Lister and he came up to see us and back and forth. Anyway, hired him. Moved him up from Atlanta. Worked with him for citizenship. Everything good. He worked with us from about '91, 1990/'91. The Reed company had closed, owed us quite a bit of money, things were getting tight, and we had to part company.

Shortly after he left, it was busy. Okay? I'm trying to run the whole thing myself. Our accounting people one day went, with my permission, went to Karen. Said [mimics] Karen, you're doing this sports promoting thing up in western Mass. Would you, have you ever thought of coming to work for your father? And she said yeah, sounds interesting. Yeah. Why don't we talk about it? So, he met her another time, got her interested, and he asked her. And if she said no to him, that's fine. Leaves me out. Doesn't put her under the gun, that she has to turn down her father, asking her in. So, I had to assume she knew that I knew he was talking other. But she made the decision on her own, came here, 17--almost 20 years now--I guess.

[1:10:51]

And then Jennifer had worked here as accounting. She's been here 18 years, the middle daughter. Our oldest daughter, Heather, lives in Plymouth. She's a teacher. Her husband is a computer guru for CVS.

LO: How old were they when they came to work with you? Roughly?

BM: Going to say 25.

LO: Okay. So, not babies.

BM: No. No, but they had been familiar with the fishing industry, familiar with the business.

LO: How so?

BM: I used to take them to trade shows. When they were real young, five, six, seven years old, the Sunday morning ritual was to put them all in the car, they'd all be dressed up in their church clothes, and all with a little bow glued to the head. Little pink bow. I would strap them in the car and I'd do a waterfront tour. New Bedford, Fairhaven, maybe go to Westport. We went down the Cape. I'd stop and talk to people. Fishermen and stuff. And they got to know people and were confident in themselves so they could talk to people and they weren't afraid to talk to different people. We'd go to trade shows. I'd take them to Miami. I did a couple of the fishing shows, either there or Seattle or Boston or whatever. The kids would be the hit of the show. Some of the shows, we had no customers in the show, but at three o'clock in the afternoon, Ann would come walking in with the three kids in tow, dressed neat, and everybody would pay attention to them, the kids, talk to the kids, so they got to not be bashful or shy or anything. I think at the end of the day that served them in good stead to not be afraid to talk to anybody. I mean, so many of today's younger kids are embarrassed to talk to older people. When you're running a business, you're always onstage. You're always selling or doing something. You can't be shy. You've got to be outgoing and talk. So, that worked out good.

LO: I think of the waterfront as such, it's mostly men kind of running the show, or at least out front.

BM: Yeah.

LO: These are your daughters. You don't have sons, right?

BM: Don't have a son.

LO: But it sounds like it's maybe been an asset in some ways.

BM: Oh, of course it is. Both have taken over and able to do everything. I mean, when you're --

LO: And respected by the customers.

[1:15:08]

BM: Oh, yes.

LO: I mean, at first they're cute, but now they're --

BM: Now they're respected. And Karen can talk kilowatts and amps and stuff. When I bought this building, I signed to buy it in 1985. I moved in in '86. That mid-year, I sold my pleasure boat and took everybody on a trip to Europe. I knew that I was going to have to buckle down and work to keep the new building going and the work. The kids were, I think Heather, the oldest, was 12, 13. Went to England, Amsterdam, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Leningrad, Russia, back down, Berlin. Went over into East Germany. Through the Wall. Checkpoint Charlie and back. Three weeks. I left. They spent another week in Paris and around, came home. But, we're going down in Germany on the train and Jennifer said to me, Dad, what's an amp? Well, for a 10-year-old to ask that question, for something that you cannot see. It isn't something that's there. It's an electrical term. Wow. How to answer that? I never thought. I just knew what it was. So, it's a unit of measure of electricity and in a sense it has to do with how much power is in the system. That kept her happy and thinking of things. So, they're both mechanically inclined, and both, if the phone rings at five o'clock and it's somebody for parts, both of them will jump out in the stock room and find the part, find the book, get the right thing, find it on the shelf. If necessary, they'll wrap it, pack it, and take out to the UPS Store for the guy. It's part of being an owner, that little extra. But they're not afraid to do that extra. So, it's been very, very good that way. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for them. See you later, Sold.

LO: Are there challenges to working with your family?

BM: Once in a while. I'm lucky that they both have the love of business and want everything to succeed. So, their thought process is very close to mine; customer-oriented. Do the best. Do it honest. And go. One of the things that my father instilled in me and I've done the same thing, run the business honest. So if the Internal Revenue Service ever walks in the door, you don't have to say oh, darn it. What am I going to do? Don't worry. [mimics] Hello, there. Office is down there. Help yourself. Well, the IRS did walk in one day a few years ago. Unannounced. Formal audit. She said I don't think you've done anything wrong, but it's just you got the luck of the draw. [mimics] Okay, no problem. There's the office. She spent a week back and forth doing this, checking that. Da da da. Didn't find anything. Everything was fine. Every bill was paid. Tax, state tax. Everything perfect. No problem.

[1:20:44]

Massachusetts Department of Revenue, state sales tax, came in. Did a complete audit. Nothing. Every penny was paid tax-wise. One of my assistant service managers at the time, said [mimics] Aw, naw, they missed it. They missed everything. I said what do you mean? No, everybody cheats. They just didn't find it. I said, don't say that again because I did not cheat. Oh, yeah, everybody cheats. I said, what did I just tell you? Don't say that again. I. Do. Not. Cheat. I don't want you to cheat anybody. I don't cheat on the tax. I pay everything. One minute later he said, aw, they just didn't find anything. I said you're out. You're fired. Fired him right on the spot. I don't need him to think that I cheated anybody. Unfortunately, he lost his wife not too long after that, but I saw him a year ago now. He understands where I was coming from. But don't want any problems. We had one customer come in here, wanted a small generator, paid $6,000 green cash for the generator, so okay, wrote the bill, $6,000. Put the money in the office, deposited it, fine. Six years later get a call from the Maine State Police. Did you do business with So and So, So and So? Yes. What did he buy from you. Well, he bought a generator. How did he pay for it? Well, cash. Did you deposit the money? Yes. Okay. I want your bank record showing where you deposited that money. Uh, okay. What did he do? Well, first send me your records then I'll tell you what he did. So, back and forth. It turns out he was growing marijuana. He took the generator and the radiator, he put the radiator in the basement and aimed it up the chimney. Took the engine was outside. So the heat signature from the helicopter would show up heat coming out of the chimney. The electricity was going across to a barn that was very well-constructed and had four layers of roofing on it so that the heat didn't come out, because he had the grow lights on it. So, it proved yes, yes, he paid cash. But I deposited it. If I hadn't have deposited it? I could be in as much trouble not for the cash but colluding with him to smuggle and grow marijuana. Anyway, so that's the --

LO: We've taken quite a while here.

BM: I don't even know what time it is.

LO: I don't know what time it is, but I think we've been at this for almost an hour and a half. I want to --

BM: 12:51.

LO: Yes.

BM: I'm getting hungry.

LO: We better wrap it up. [laughs] But I did want to ask is there anything really kind of burning that we didn't talk about?

BM: Well, when we say burning. I want to call it a business philosophy.

[1:25:08]

Treat the customer right, yes. But in this business and the majority of those suppliers that are in town I think have the same attitude. That fisherman is risking his life to go out there, invested money to go catch fish. He doesn't make a nickel if his boat is broken down. It's one thing to sell a product. It's another thing to support it. You can sell the product cheap and you don't have enough money to support it, it's only going to last so long. So, it's going to be a balance. You sell it and make a profit. Sure. You take half the profit home, but the other half you put on the shelf in parts. We've got now very close a million dollars' worth of parts on the shelf. We've got engines and generators on the shelf, start. Somebody needs one, right here, ready to go. You need to support, you need to put some money back into the business to support what you've sold. That has always been my philosophy and my father before me. Supporting what you have sold. That fisherman has built up a trust in you. You can't let him down because he doesn't make a nickel if his boat is broken down. These guys are in here and they don't yell and scream and carry on, but they need their product or their engine fixed now. You do what you have to do and you got to put the parts on the shelf. It costs money to have personnel. You got to send them for training on engine. You got to have the computer to plug in, a new electronic engine. It's support. It's a philosophy that I think has paid off for us and some of the other shore-side businesses that supply stuff to the boats. New Bedford Ship Supply. The net manufacturers. The people that build hydraulics and this. You've got to support the product that you build. There are people will buy stuff of the internet. Some, yeah, it's going to be a few dollars cheaper, but what happens when it breaks? Nobody's around to fix it. Some people will try to buy our product or a competitive product off the Internet. Same exact engine that we sell. And there are places where you can go and buy, but when it breaks, who do they take it to? They got to come back to us with the tail between their legs and say, well. I have a problem like that going on right as we speak with a local boat. Tried to save a dollar. At the end of the day it wound up costing him $10, because the engine didn't fit right and it wasn't right for his particular application, but anyway.

LO: I really thank you for taking so much time and sharing.

BM: No problem. I'm glad. I don't know whether we got everything out. Did you get your questions?

LO: I did. I mean, it's always a roundabout thing, but I think that we covered a lot of ground.

BM: Yes. Good.

LO: So, thank you.

BM: I'm still upset that the Working Waterfront Festival isn't going.

LO: [laughs] It is. Actually, you're about to get some information about that, but that's not for the tape. [laughs]

BM: Okay.

LO: Shall I shut this off?

BM: If you wish. Yes.

[1:30:23] End of audio